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ABSTRACT

This paper is an application of attribution theory to the processing of juvenile delinquents in an attempt to understand the differential treatment of female and male offenders within the juvenile justice system. The paper explores the attributions of juvenile delinquency both by male and female minors, by male and female parents, and by male and female probation officers. The dependent variables are the respondents' causal explanations along an internal-external continuum and along a criminal-medical continuum. The results confirmed earlier laboratory findings that females tend to give more internal attributions of their own and others' behavior when a negative event is involved than do males. Female delinquents blamed themselves and other delinquents more than male delinquents did. Female probation officers blamed the minor more than did male officers, regardless of the sex of the minor. Mothers of delinquents were more likely to blame their child, as well as themselves (their family), than were the fathers of delinquents. Female delinquency was explained differently from male delinquency and was seen as more deviant than male. (Author/IRT)

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SEX DIFFERENCES IN ATTRIBUTIONS OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

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SEX DIFFERENCES IN ATTRIBUTIONS OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

This paper is an application of attribution theory to the processing of juvenile delinquents in an attempt to understand the differential treatment of female and male offenders within that system. In recent years there has been a large and growing body of literature regarding female delinquency (Armstrong, 1977; Chesney-Lind, 1973, 1977; Clark and Haurek, 1966; Jensen and Eve, 1979; Morris, 1974, 1965; Reige, 1972). Several writers have documented that females have been processed differently than males within the juvenile justice system (Armstrong, 1977; Block and Geis, 1972; Chesney-Lind, 1977; Conway and Bogdan, 1977; Price, 1977, Ward, 1968). Sometimes this discrimination on the basis of sex has worked in favor of females before the law, but most of the time it has worked against them. Traditionally, girls have been more likely to be apprehended for status offenses such as running away and being beyond control, while boys have been more readily apprehended for criminal misconduct. However, female status offenders are often more severely punished than male delinquents (Armstrong, 1977; Chesney-Lind, 1977).

One reason for this biased treatment may be the differential perceptions of male and female delinquents. When a girl is bad, she is perceived as really bad, whereas a boy who misbehaves will often be shrugged off with a "boys will be boys". The consequences of this biased treatment may have been to also affect the self-attributions made by the delinquents themselves. This paper will argue that the differential processing of male and female delinquents is a result of systematic sex differences in the initial causal perceptions of delinquent bahavior. To study this question, this paper will examine the attributions made of female and male delinquency by participants in the juvenile justice system, including the delinquent minors, their parents and their probation officers.

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Several studies in the field of attribution theory point out that sex-role variables may strongly affect the perception of causality. The sex of the actor, the sex of the observer or the attributor, and the sex-role expectations associated with the behavior have all been found to affect the attributional outcome (Deaux, 1976). Generally, the female subjects in these studies have been reluctant to give themselves or other females credit for success, while they readily blame failure of self and same-sex others on bad luck (Deaux and Emswiller, 1974; Feldman-Summers and Kiesler, 1974; Etaugh and Brown, 1975; Feather and Simon, 1975). Although attribution studies generally have shown a marked tendency for most persons to attribute success to external variables (Weiner, 1974; Weiner, Frieze, et al, 1972), it has been found that persons with a low ego are more likely to attribute failure to themselves than to outside factors (Bar-Tal and Frieze, 1974; Crandall, 1969; Montanelli and Hill, 1969). Due to the frequent negative labeling by the justice system and perhaps a lack of success in the "conventional" world, female delinquents may have developed a general low self-esteem which would tend to bias them in favor of internal self-attributions for delinquency (Morris, 1965). Male delinquents on the other hand, have often been described as developing "neutralization techniques" or external attributions to cope with their delinquency (Sykes and Matza, 1957; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960).

Most of the research in attribution theory has been taking place in a laboratory setting. Several writers have questioned the methodological and theoretical values of some of these studies, and whether the attribution principles demonstrated in the laboratory can be shown to also operate in a natural social setting (Shields, 1977).

The juvenile justice system offers a perfect real-life social setting for the study of causal attributions. In the juvenile justice system, causal attributions are important parts of the everyday routine. The causal perceptions made by the persons involved in the system affect how the minor's case is processed and categorized, as well as the final dispositions made of his/her case. The causal perceptions made by the

minor and his/her family will affect how much they agree with the course of action and importantly affect the relative success of rehabilitation efforts.

This paper then will explore the attributions of juvenile delinquency both by male and female minors, by male and female parents, and male and female probation officers. The minors will be explaining their own behavior, while the parents and probation officers can be seen as observers of the delinquent behavior. However, due to their special relationship to the minors, family members, explaining their child's misconduct, could also be seen as actors, explaining their own failure to bring up a child properly.

The dependent variables in this study are the respondents' causal explanations along an internal-external continuum (Heider, 1969), and along a criminal model-medical model continuum (Aubert and Messinger, 1968). An internal attribution would mean that the fault or responsibility of the delinquency is attributed to the minor himself/herself, or in the case of parents, partly to themselves as well, while an external attribution would mean that the blame is put on factors outside the minor. A criminal attribution would mean that the minor is seen as personally responsible for his misconduct, while a medical attribution would mean that the minor is seen as sick and in need of help, i.e., he couldn't help his/her behavior.

Method

Procedure

A questionnaire study was conducted among the three groups of respondents in a large urban county in Northern California. Due to the legally protected status of juvenile delinquents in California, it was extremely difficult to get access to any information about the minors themselves, their behavior and their background. Permission to do the study was finally granted by the Chief Juvenile Probation Officer and the Presiding Judge of the Juvenile Court. A parental permission of a waiver of privacy was also obtained from parents in order to let the minors participate in the study, as California law prohibits divulging any information to persons not directly involved in the legal processing of juvenile cases. (See California Welfare and Institutions Code.)

The data on the probation officers was obtained by administering questionnaires at the weekly unit meetings for the probation officers and their supervisors. The author first contacted the supervisor, then went to each unit meeting to give out the questionnaire and explain the study. Typically, the questionnaire was filled out immediately.

The data on minors and their families was obtained primarily in the juvenile court waiting area. A request to draw a random sample of minors, and to interview them in their home or elsewhere was denied. Only strict, voluntary participation was permitted. The author sat in the court waiting room and gave out questionnaires to waiting families and minors. The waiting period was often long and boring, and the respondents appeared happy to have something to do while they waited for their turn in court. It was stressed that the questionnaire had nothing to do with their legal proceedings in court, that the researcher did not come from the probation department, and that all results would remain confidential. No attempt was made to match the responses of the parents with those of their child as no identification was asked for on the questionnaires, and the children were assured that their answers would not be seen by their probation officers or parents. No minors pending their detention hearing or in detention were interviewed for the study. The minors were all in court because of behavior that brought them within the description of section 601 or 602 of the California Welfare and Institutions Code. Section 601 refers to minors with problems such as running away, being beyond control and truancy. It refers to behavior that would not be considered law-violating if committed by adults. Section 602 refers to law violators, i.e. violations of laws that would also be considered law violations if committed by adults.

Subjects

One hundred and one (101) of the 150 probation officers in the county participated in the questionnaire. The data was collected during the summer vacation, and no attempt was made to reach those not present

at the unit meetings. Only one supervisor refused to have his unit of nine officers participate. All the other officers contacted participated in the study. There were 73 male and 28 female probation officers in the sample.

Sixty-eight minors completed the questionnaire. Of these, 46 were male and 22 were female. Among the minors who participated, 54.9% were on probation for property offenses, 13.7% for incorrigibility, 2% for truancy and 2% for drug violations. The rest did not indicate why they were in court. The majority of the boys had been involved in property offenses, while this was true for only 20% of the females. About 40% of the girls had been involved in status offenses, 2% for drugs, and the rest did not indicate why they were in court. Fifteen percent of the boys had been involved in status offenses.

Fifty-seven parents completed the questionnaire. Of these, 44 were mothers and 10 were fathers, 1 was a grandfather and 2 did not indicate their relationship. (This is an extremely small sample of fathers, but then very few fathers ever appear in court.) Five of the parents contacted declined to participate, but only one of these also refused participation for the child. In general, both parents and minors expressed satisfaction at being able to give <u>their</u> opinions about the causes of delinquency. Several parents wrote in the questionnare that they wished more people would listen to their point of view.

Questionnaire Instrument

Three different questionnaires were administered, one to probation officers, one to minors, and one to the families of minors. The questions were similar in each of the questionnaires, but written so that they applied specifically to each subject group. Both open-ended and structured questions were used. The open-ended responses were later recoded into internal and external or mixed internal and external causes by two independent judges.

In the open-ended questions, minors explained the causes of their own delinquency. In the structured questions, they were asked to

explain the causes for specific delinquent offenses, including their own, as well as for delinquency in general. Probation officers were asked to explain the causes of delinquency, based upon their experience in the field; parents were mainly asked to explain their child's behavior and the minors were asked to explain their own behavior, as well as delinquency in general.

Results

Observer Attributions of Male and Female Delinquency

Both probation officers and parents tended to give internal attributions of both male and female delinquency. However, the type of internal attributions differed sharply for males and females. Girls were seen as rebelling against existing sex-role expectations, while boys were seen as conforming to sex-role expectations. The girls were seen as wanting independence, particularly from parents, while boys were seen as conforming to peer pressure and masculinity demands. Typical examples of such attributions for female delinquents were:

> "She wants lots of freedom." "Girls tend to break out of molds by getting into negative things." "They are rebellious against parents."

On the other hand, boys were described in the following manner:

> "Need for masculine identity." "Need to impress friends." "Always trying to prove something--big-man image."

Girls were also seen as having a lack of self-respect, and often their behavior was viewed as more negative than boys' behavior. For example:

> "Girls tend to act in a more destructive manner."
>
> "Many girls learn to manipulate both parents during childhood, become enraged when they learn parents want to enforce standards."

In general, probation officers tended to use more of a criminal-model attribution pattern than parents who tended to use a medical

model in their attributions. Probation officers would say: "He chose to be delinquent, therefore he is responsible", whereas parents would say: "He's sick, he needs help." This was true, regardless of the sex of the delinquent.

Male and Female Observer Attributions of Delinquency

The results showed that female probation officers were more likely to give internal attributions of delinquency than were male probation officers, and to assign responsibility to the minor's family rather than to other external variables, regardless of the sex of the offender. In the structured questions, male probation officers gave significantly more weight to social class and the school than did female probation officers, $x^2(6) = 13.73$, $p < .03$, and $x^2(1) = 14.96$, $p < .02$. In sex offenses, females gave more weight to the family, $x^2(1) = 3.03$, $p < .08$.

The same tendency held true for parents. Although the extremely small sample of fathers makes it hard to generalize, mothers were more likely than fathers to blame themselves, their family or the minor himself/herself. Fathers were more likely to blame the school system. For property offenses, mothers were more likely to blame the child, $x^2(2) = 6.49$, $p < .06$, while fathers blamed the school, $x^2(2) = 6.49$, $p < .03$. In status offenses, mothers were more likely to see the family as responsible, $x^2(2) = 9.19$, $p < .001$, while fathers stressed the importance of the school system, $x^2(2) = 5.08$, $p < .07$. Even for violent offenses, fathers were more likely to blame the school, $x^2(2) = 7.85$, $p < .01$.

Male and Female Self-Attributions of Delinquency

The female delinquents in this sample were more likely to blame themselves for their behavior (77.9%) than were males (56.5%). Typical examples of female attributions were:

"Me, I'm to blame." "It was no one's fault but my own."

"I feel ashamed that I should have done so."

In contrast, male delinquents were more likely to give external reasons for their delinquency, such as parents, bad friends, school, lack of money and society not allowing them enough freedom. For example:

"I don't feel I'm a thoroughly rotten kid, I just have problems with my mom." "I was walking home and this person called me a name, so I hit him." "Drinking and drugs got myself and others into trouble at the time of the crime." "Me and a friend just started talking about it, and it happened."

The main external reason used by females was the family. Here is one example:

"I think it's partly my fault, and partly not my fault. Because when I was 11 years old, my mother died, and then I had to take care of myself. Because I was just left with my father, and he works all day. My father really didn't care about me, and I had no money or anything, not even friends."

The female delinquents were also more likely to make internal attributions of delinquency in general (68.2%) than were male delinquents (50%). They were therefore more likely to see delinquents as being personally responsible for their behavior than were male delinquents.

Discussion

The results of this study confirmed the earlier laboratory findings that females tend to give more internal attributions of own and others' behavior when a negative event is involved, than do males. Female delinquents blamed themselves and other delinquents more than male delinquents. Female probation officers blamed the minor more than did male probation officers, regardless of the sex of the minor. Mothers of delinquents were more likely to blame their child, as well as themselves (their family) than were the fathers of delinquents. Female delinquency was explained differently than male delinquency. Female delinquency was seen as more deviant than male delinquency.

Although probation officers tended to give criminal attributions and families somewhat more medical attributions, a general internal attribution pattern prevailed by observers of both male and female

delinquency. This then partly supports the Jones and Nisbett hypothesis (1972) that observers tend to make internal attributions, and actors tend to make external attributions. Their prediction for actors was only confirmed by the male minors in this study, and not by the females. Since a child's delinquency closely reflects on the parent's ability as childraisers, the parents in this study could also be seen as actors looking at their own behavior. The greater tendency for mothers to assume the blame for their child's delinquency could therefore be explained by the greater female tendency to blame themselves for negative events (Again, the small sample size makes it difficult to ascertain any differences about the parents).

All these attributions show a consistent pattern of increased internal attributions for female delinquency. Not only were the females seen as more deviant than males, they were also blamed more for their deviancy than males, and they blamed themselves more. This pattern emerged in spite of the fact that more of the males in this sample were apprehended for real law violations (602 offenses) than were the females. The attributions in this study are therefore quite consistent with the findings cited earlier (Armstrong, 1977) where females were found to be punished more severely for status offenses than males were for law violations.

The importance of these differential causal perceptions should not be underestimated. How a probation officer perceives the cause of a minor's misbehavior will affect how he decides to deal with the youngster. Similarly, the causal perceptions of minors and their families will affect how much they agree with the probation officer in his assessment, and consequently how much they will cooperate with the recommendations that are made. Continued negative labeling by the system may strongly affect the self-attributions of a minor. The minor is younger and more powerless than the other participants in the system. Consistent differences in recommendations and dispositions as a result of sex alone, will serve to further reinforce the stereotype that female delinquents are more guilty than males. A recent paper by Zimmerman and Chein (1977) found that the recommendation made by probation officers

to the court had more impact on the judge's decisions in the case than the legal facts involved. Thus, not only may these causal perceptions influence the recommendations that are made, they will also influence the final disposition. The juvenile delinquency research cited earlier (Armstrong, 1977; Chesney-Lind, 1977) has shown that these dispositions quite often are different for males and for females. Such differential dispositional treatment may well be a result of different causal perceptions.

A knowledge of how sex differences in actors and observers can influence the original attributions might prove a way to do away with such sex-biased discrimination in the treatment of male and female juvenile offenders.

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